

**Statement of Mark Rey
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United States Department of Agriculture**

**Before the Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States House of Representatives
Concerning
The National Fire Plan and 2002 Wildland Fire Season Preparedness
June 13, 2002**

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am Mark Rey, Under Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment in the Department of Agriculture. With me today are Tim Hartzell, Director of the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination at the Department of the Interior; and Denny Truesdale, Assistant Coordinator, National Fire Plan, Forest Service. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management and in implementing the National Fire Plan, it is appropriate to use one statement to talk about the National Fire Plan, review the outlook for the 2002 wildland fire season, and describe our Departments' state of readiness and preparedness for the fire season.

At the outset, Mr. Chairman, we want to thank you and your committee for your support of the fire management program and, most importantly, for your support of the brave young men and women who make up our firefighting corps. Our firefighters do an impressive job under adverse conditions and they deserve our thanks and admiration. While we prepare to fight fire this season as best we can, fighting wildland fires is only one aspect of the work we must do to protect communities and restore ecosystems.

Today I will talk about several recent events regarding the National Fire Plan, the severe fire season now underway, and how the five Federal land-managing agencies and our partners are making preparations.

I am pleased to report that on May 23, 2002, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior joined with the nation's Governors to endorse the Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Wildland Fire Strategy. The 10-Year Implementation Plan is an historic document setting forth an agenda to aggressively manage wildland fires, and reduce hazardous fuels, protect communities, and restore ecosystems over the next decade. It came about because of the high level of growth in the wildland urban interface that is placing more citizens and property at the risk of wildland fire, the increasing ecosystem health problems across the landscape, and an awareness of that past suppression has contributed to more severe wildfires. The 10-Year Implementation Plan will help reduce the risk of wildfire to communities and the environment by building collaboration at all levels of government. It sets performance

requirements for the delivery of increased firefighting resources and investments in long-term land management solutions. To achieve these goals, local managers will work with states, tribes, local governments and citizens to plan the location of firefighting resources fuels reduction treatments and restoration projects in previously burned areas as well as maintenance of healthy acres.

Important to the leadership, accountability, and coordination in carrying out the National Fire Plan is the newly formed Wildland Fire Leadership Council. The Council has met twice since its inception in April and will provide leadership for the overall National Fire Plan. The Council is a cooperative, interagency organization dedicated to achieving consistent implementation of the 10-Year Implementation Plan, the National Fire Plan, and the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. This oversight will ensure policy coordination, accountability and effective implementation of the wildland fire programs.

The Fire Situation and Outlook

I would now like to turn to the fire outlook for this year. As you know, we are already experiencing a number of large wildland fires across the nation. Since 1999, La Niña, a phenomenon characterized by the abnormally cold temperatures in the tropical Pacific, has plagued much of the country with drier than usual weather. The resulting drought condition in the Southwest, Rockies and East Coast has set the stage for a potentially active fire season in those areas. Since October, areas receiving below normal amounts include Southern California, the Southern Great Basin, Southwest, Rocky Mountains and the Eastern Seaboard. The Northeast experienced the second driest September-to-February period in the last 107 years. So we expect the fire season to be a severe one.

Analyzing fuel and weather conditions across the country, the areas of greatest fire potential today include the Southwest, Colorado, Southern California, and the Southern Great Basin. Also, fire potential is high in Northern Florida, Northwest Minnesota and the Southeast Alaskan Panhandle.

The weather outlook for later this summer and fall calls for generally warmer than normal temperatures in the West and Southeast. Rainfall is predicted to be near normal, except for above normal early rains in the Pacific Northwest along with late summer/early fall dryness throughout the West. As a result, fire potential in the Rockies and Eastern Seaboard states is expected to increase this summer and fall. For the overall 2002 fire season, the greatest potential for fires is in Southern California, the Southwest, Great Basin, Rockies and the Eastern Seaboard from Florida to Maine.

Wildland Fire Preparedness and the National Fire Plan

Each year the five land-managing agencies of the Departments prepare to prevent, detect, and take prompt, effective initial attack suppression action on wildland fires. In order to do this, we need trained and equipped firefighters and firefighting equipment. We maintain qualified firefighters through training and apprenticeship programs, and we

have aggressive recruitment and retention programs. We maintain a number of facilities for firefighter housing and equipment storage.

Firefighter safety is our highest priority. Firefighting is a high risk, high consequence activity, and the Forest Service and Interior have always had strong firefighter safety and training programs. This year, however, following the ThirtyMile Fire tragedy in July 2001, where four firefighters lost their lives, we have redoubled our efforts. The ThirtyMile tragedy prompted an examination of the programs to identify areas needing improvement. The areas identified include managing firefighter fatigue, reinforcing use of the 10 Standard Fire Orders and the 18 Watch Out situations, and developing training to avoid entrapment by fire. All of these improvements in training and safety are in place for this fire season. We are committed to doing everything we can to improve firefighter safety.

We also purchase and maintain firefighter personal protection gear and engines, other vehicles, and contract for helicopters and airtankers. Preparedness also includes assisting other Federal agencies, Tribes and States with fire training programs, planning assistance, shared equipment use contracts, and support for interagency fire coordination centers.

In 2001, we made a great start toward increasing our preparedness resources, thanks to the National Fire Plan funding. The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior treated 2.25 million acres to reduce fuel loads and protect priority communities at risk. We will continue this success in FY 2002 and collectively plan to treat 2.4 million acres. Together, we hired an additional 5,474 fire employees, for a total Federal wildland fire workforce of 17,633. We purchased 406 additional engines, 56 additional dozers, contracted for 31 additional helicopters, and purchased or contracted for many other pieces of equipment and aircraft. Prior to the National Fire Plan, Interior sponsored 14 interagency hotshot crews and the Forest Service sponsored 52. With the increase in readiness capability made possible by the National Fire Plan, the Department of the Interior added eight additional Type I crews. The Forest Service added 13 Type I crews.

In addition to our Federal firefighting crews, we call upon many other firefighting forces for assistance. Our working relationship with our State and local partners has never been stronger. Often, State and local firefighters are the first to respond to fire incidents. In severe fire seasons, State, Tribal, military, National Guard, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and local firefighters are instrumental in fighting wildland fire. We rely heavily on these crews for support, especially the rural and volunteer fire department crews, which are the first line of initial attack in up to 90% of all wildland fires. With National Fire Plan funds, we were able to improve rural and volunteer fire departments' (RFDs) initial attack abilities with personal protective gear, equipment, and training. In many instances last year, these RFDs purchased equipment with our grant money, and immediately responded to wildland fires on Federal land, utilizing the new equipment or protective gear. The Department of the Interior assisted 1,445 RFDs last year by providing almost 10 million dollars in grants.

The Forest Service provided over \$138,000,000 to states, volunteer fire departments, and local communities to assist firefighting activities in 2001. With these grants our State and local government partners purchased fire equipment for local fire departments, developed hazard mitigation plans, treated 76,236 acres of hazardous fuels on private lands, accomplished community fire planning, developed market utilization of small diameter material removed through thinning activities, and conducted fire prevention and fire education training.

I would like to point out that the five land managing agencies have updated the majority of their fire management plans to be consistent with Federal wildland fire policy, with a goal to have all plans updated in 2004, if not sooner. The fire management plans are important because they provide the guidance for fire management officers, line management officers and incident commanders to plan for future fire management decisions, and to make quick decisions when a fire incident occurs, as to the appropriate techniques and tactics for effective wildland fire suppression. Initial attack is successful in keeping more than 95% of the fires under 100 acres.

2002 Fire Season Readiness

With the forecast for a severe wildland fire season, each agency began early and continues to bring national fire readiness capacity to its highest level. To date, the Department of the Interior has 5,325 firefighters and fire support personnel and the Department of Agriculture will have approximately 10,160 firefighters. Our combined goal is to have in place a Federal wildland fire workforce of over 17,800 personnel. This is an increase of 6,326 personnel from FY 2000. When we realized the severity of the wildland fire outlook, we began to hire seasonal firefighters early and we are working to place firefighting crews and equipment in locations where they can be mobilized quickly and effectively.

When local areas anticipate or experience above normal fire activity, the Departments have the authority, through what is known as “severity funding”, to provide suppression funds to those units so that they can bring in additional staff and equipment to improve initial and extended attack response capabilities and increase prevention activities. Already this year, the Forest Service has approved over \$36 million for severity assistance; Interior has approved nearly \$9.75 million in severity assistance. Federal wildland fire agencies have enhanced initial attack capabilities in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Montana, and Nevada by pre-positioning resources ranging from airtankers, to hand crews, to engines in strategic locations.

Weather, fuels, and drought conditions all contribute to the number and size of wildfires. We will never be able to put out every fire every time, but we can reduce the number and the risk of wildfire over time.

Reducing Fuel Loads by Restoring Forest Health

Fighting wildland fire is only one part of addressing wildland fire risks. Another critical aspect is reducing the buildup of hazardous fuels in our forests and grasslands by restoring fire adapted ecosystems, thereby reducing wildland fire risks to communities, conserving natural resources, and most importantly, saving public and firefighter lives. . Bipartisan Congressional support has provided the Forest Service and Interior with the necessary funding to increase the acreage of fuels treatment to reduce risks to communities and ecosystems. As we stated earlier, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior treated 2.25 million acres to reduce fuel loads and protect priority communities at risk. For the Department of the Interior, this is more than doubling prior accomplishments. We will continue this success in FY 2002 and collectively plan to treat 2.4 million acres. Continued bipartisan Congressional support for working with communities and interest groups are vital to firefighter and public safety, reduction of risks to communities, and to the implementation of ecosystem health goals of the National Fire Plan.

This year, the Departments are beginning the development of a common interagency fire budget planning process that will better refine wildland fire management readiness resources. The process will provide all agencies with a uniform, performance-based system for identifying the preparedness resources necessary to deliver a cost effective fire management program. This system will be deployed by the 2004 fire season and will influence readiness decisions for the 2005 fire season. Some interim components may be online even earlier.

Summary

With the outlook for a severe fire season, the five federal land-managing agencies and our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure the safety of firefighters, communities, and resources. We appreciate continued bipartisan support from the Congress. The 10-Year Implementation Plan and the Wildland Fire Leadership Council will continue to foster cooperation and communication among Federal agencies, States, local governments, Tribes, and interested groups and citizens to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and resources in our care.

This concludes our statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be happy to answer any questions you and the members of the subcommittee may have.